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AUTHOR Neiman, Jeri A.; Connor, Michael E.
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ABSTRACT

The study of the family climate of one-parent families may lead to a better comprehension of family relationships and increased understanding of the family's basic organizational structure. To examine the difference between married and single-parent families, parents single for 3 years or less (N=29), parents single for 4 years or more (N=28), and married parents (N=16) completed the Family Environment Scale and a family information sheet. Analyses of the data revealed that while emphasis on such things as direct expressiveness of feelings and moral and religious beliefs and practices differed for the three groups, the differences were not statistically significant. Comparison of the three family groups to findings of studies on normal and distressed families showed that all three of the family samples were normal, rather than distressed, families. Identifying and studying functional one-parent families as a distinctive family form appears to be an important implication for future research. (Author/PAS)

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One Parent Families: A study of short- and long-term families using family climate

Jeri A. Neiman and Michael E. Connor
California State University, Long Beach

Running Head: One Parent Families

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One Parent Families: A study of short- and long-term families using family climate

Presently, over 19% of all families with children under the age of 18 are one parent families. The majority of the children in the families are living with their mothers, although more fathers are raising their children alone than in the past. Most of the children are living in one parent homes due to separation or divorce, but increasing numbers of children are being raised by a parent who has never married. Indications are that more children will grow up in one parent families in future years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

The extensive literature on family structure and child well being has focused narrowly on theoretical underpinnings and research methods utilized in studies of one parent families (Ross & Sawhill, 1975). A major thrust of research has been to determine the effects of parental absence on children. Research in this area usually looks at situations where the father is the absent parent and it focuses on assessment of the effects of father absence on male children. Studies on the effects of mother absence are missing.

Research findings from three different areas--delinquency, academic achievement and social development--

suggest there may be some differences for children growing up in one parent families compared to children from two parent homes. Studies on juvenile delinquency indicate factors underlying delinquency and family instability are associated with how the parent relates to the children: the discipline and supervision of the children and the type of affectional relationship between parent and child (Glueck & Glueck, 1951, 1972; McCord, McCord, & Thurber, 1962). Evidence from the area of academic achievement indicates social conditions are strongly associated with school achievement (Deutsch & Brown, 1964) and that husbandless mothers are generally more, rather than less, concerned about the educational achievement of their children (Kriesberg, 1967). Studies on the social development of children in one parent homes indicate male children tend t prefer activities which are less aggressive and competitive (Hetherington, 1966), female children may differ in interaction styles with the opposite sex (Hetherington, 1972), and that contact with the absent parent and additional adult caretakers are associated with the positive social development of the children.

Findings from these three areas are inconclusive as to whether or not the children are affected by father's absence. Herzog and Sudia, in an extensive review of the literature on father absence conclude:

> Existing data do not permit a decisive answer to the questions about the effects on children of fatherlessness. However we would not expect adequate evidence to indicate dramatic differences stemming from fatherlessness per se. (1968, p. 181).

A recent approach in research on one parent families studies the situation of children in the homes and recognizes a wide range of parental involvement in the rearing of children. Elements in the general quality of the children's home life, factors associated with adjustments to parental loss, and the changing roles of family members provide more knowledge about children living in one parent families.

A comprehensive longitudinal study of children and divorce by Wallerstein & Kelley (1976) describes the emotional impact of divorce on children and adolescents. Stages in the process of divorce which effect children are: (1) the predivorced family, (2) events leading up to and surrounding the parent's decision to separate and the immediately following transition, (3) the changed social, economic and psychological realities, and (4) the alteration of the parent-child relationship. Thus, for many children, the process of divorce is characterized by initial loss and turmoil followed by several years of instability in which attention received by them from their

parents fluctuates.

Research on family member roles in one parent families suggests parents who rear their children alone do so without clear guidelines or prescriptions. Evidence verifies the special types of psychological and sociological adjustments the parents must make (Mendes, 1976; Gasser & Taylor, 1976). Fathers must adjust to the responsibilities of homemaker and nurturer to the children. Mothers must assume responsibilities of provider and authority. The changed structure of one parent families results in a new definition of children's roles (Weiss, 1979). The one parent family structure makes possible the development of a new relationship in which the children are defined as having responsibilities and rights in the household not very different from the parents' own. Apparently, children in one parent homes become more responsible, more independent, and more alert to adult values and concerns than other children the same age.

Within a family system perspective, the family is viewed as a social system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1980). Theorists emphasize the regulation and direction of the family environment on the behavior of the people within it. The reorganization of the one parent family as an ongoing social system requires family roles be reassigned, status positions shifted and values and goals be reoriented.

The evidence from studies of one parent families suggests an approach which would attempt to assess the impact of the family environment on individual and family functioning would increase knowledge about children growing up in one parent homes.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the family climate of one parent families. Understanding the climate provides a framework for better comprehending relationships among family members, the directions for personal growth emphasized in the family, and the family's basic organizational structure. Literature as well as research on single parent families emphasizes a period of transition for individual family members and for the family unit which follows the marital dissolution or death of the spouse. The transition period is characterized by changes in behavior and attitudes, changes which may fluctuate over time as adjustments are made. Authors distinguish a transitional period of entry into single parenthood, which lasts for about two to three years (Schlesinger, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelley, 1976), from a later period of functioning as a single parent family. They stress the role of uncertainty and expectation as to the duration of single parenthood in the adjustments of the parent and the children.

The reorganization of the single parent family unit suggests one parent families may have a family environment

which is different from a two parent family environment. Furthermore, the family milieu of one parent families during the transition period may differ from the family environment of longer term one parent families.

Although the general nature of the study is exploratory, the research hypothesizes differences between the social climates of the three family groups based on previous study findings. The hypothesized trends are:

1. Two parent family environments will emphasize cohesiveness among family members and organization of the unit.

2. Short-term one parent family environments will be characterized by conflictual relationships among family members, decreased emphasis on independence and have a less organized and controlled family unit.

3. Long-term one parent family environments will be characterized by relationships between members which are more conflictual than two parent families, will emphasize independence and achievement of family members, and will have a less organized, but more controlling unit than the two parent family.

Method

Subjects

Parents with children under the age of 18 living in the home who volunteered to complete the Family Environment

Scale and demographic survey were used for the study. A total of 73 parents participated in the study. Of these, 16 were married parents and 57 were single parents. The sample of married families was randomly selected from telephone listings for the Long Beach area. The sample of single parent families was obtained from the Long Beach Chapter of Parents Without Partners, Inc. Single parents were divided into two groups on the basis of the length of time as single parents: parents who had been single for three years or less and parents who had been single for four or more years.

Married subjects. In the married group, there were 11 fathers and 5 mothers. Most were married for about 18 years. Fathers were generally older than the mothers, the average ages being 48 and 35 respectively.

Single subjects (short-term). Parents who were single for three years or less constituted the second group of subjects. In this group there were 29 parents; seven fathers and 22 mothers. Six parents were separated, 21 divorced and two were widowed. The length of time as single parents averaged about one and a half years. Average age of the fathers was 43 years old, and mothers' average age was 40.

Single subjects (long-term). The third group of subjects were parents who had been single for over three

years. Twenty-eight parents were in the group, three of which were fathers. Two parents were separated, 22 were divorced, and three widowed. Most fathers and mothers had been single for about eight years. The average parental age was 41 years for both fathers and mothers.

Apparatus

A family information survey was developed to obtain demographic background information about the families. The survey consisted of questions about the parent, the children, and socioeconomic status of the family. A modified version of the family information survey was developed for subjects who were single parents.

The Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1974) assesses the social climates of all types of families. The FES is composed of ten subscales which focus on the measurement and description of the interpersonal relationships among family members, on the directions of personal growth which are emphasized in the family, and on the basic organizational structure of the family.

The cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict subscales are conceptualized as Relationship Dimensions. These subscales assess the extent to which family members feel that they belong to and are proud of their family, the extent to which there is open expressions within the family and the degree to which conflictual interactions are

characteristic of the family.

The second group of subscales are conceptualized as personal development or Personal Growth Dimensions. They measure the emphasis within the family on certain developmental processes which may be fostered by family living. Independence measures the emphasis on autonomy and family members doing things on their own. Achievement orientation measures the amount of emphasis on academic and competitive concerns. Intellectual-cultural orientation reflects the degree to which the family is concerned with a variety of intellectual and cultural activities. The active recreational orientation and moral-religious emphasis subscales measure other important dimensions of personal growth.

The last two subscales of organization and control are conceptualized as assessing System Maintenance Dimensions. These dimensions are system-oriented in that they obtain information about the structure or organization within the family and about the degree of control which is usually exerted by family members vis-a-vis each other.

The Scale consists of 90 true-false items which respondents can complete in about 15 minutes.

Procedure

Each two parent family was mailed a survey packet which consisted of an introductory letter, instructions for completing the survey, the Family Environment Scale, and a

family information sheet.

The researcher attended ten PWP functions for the purpose of obtaining a sample of single parents who were willing to participate in the research study.

Single parents were informed as to the general research study and asked to voluntarily participate by completing the confidential survey. Parents were told to think of their present family situation and their present relationships with their children when answering Family Environment Scale items.

Completed Family Environment Scales and family information sheets for families with children under the age of eighteen and living in the home were used in the study. For the married subjects, a total of 16 families was obtained. For the one parent family groups, a total of 57 families was obtained for the study. Of the 57, 29 were short-term single parent families (less than 3 years) and 28 had been single parents for longer than 3 years.

Data from the family information sheet was compiled to describe each family group. Ranges, averages, and means were used for description of the families. Parental responses to items on the FES were anlayzed using a two-way analysis of variance. Comparisons of parental responses by parental group (two parent families, one parent less than 3 years, and one parent over 3 years), by sex of parent,

and by the ten subscales on the Family Environment Scale were made.

Results

A series of t tests between the married group sample means for the ten subscales and the Family Environment Scale norms for married families revealed no differences. Table 1 lists means, standard deviations and ANOVA comparisons between the three parent groups studied.

Insert Table 1 about here

Relationship Dimension

There were no significant differences for families group, sex of parent, or interaction effects on the three variables--cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict--which form the relationship dimension on the Family Environment Scale.

Personal Growth Dimension

There were significant differences for family groups on the moral-religious emphasis variable. Two parent families obtained scores on moral-religious emphasis which were higher than either of the one parent family groups. Short-term one parent families obtained the lowest scores for the variable.

There were also significant differences between

fathers and mothers on moral-religious emphasis. Mothers in all three groups obtained higher scores for the variable than did fathers.

Differences between family groups or sex of parent on achievement were not significant, however, interaction effects (family groups by sex of parent) on achievement were significant. One parent families scored higher on achievement than did the two parent family group. Short-term one parent families obtained the highest mean score.

In general, one parent families scored higher on independence than did the two parent family and fathers scored higher when compared to mothers. Long-term single fathers had the highest mean score for independence. The differences were not significant statistically.

The long-term one parent families obtained the highest scores on intellectual-cultural orientation, whereas the short-term family group obtained the lowest scores. Similarly, for active-recreational orientation, long-term one parent families scored highest and short-term families the lowest of the three groups.

System Maintenance Dimension

There were no significant differences between family groups, sex of parent, or interaction effects on either of the two variables, organization and control, which form the System Maintenance Dimension.

Two parent families obtained the highest scores for organization and short-term families obtained the lowest scores. For control, the short-term one parent families obtained the highest scores and two parent families obtained the lowest. Interaction between family group and sex of parent on control resulted in a noticeable effect: even though one parent families obtained higher scores on control than the two parent families, single fathers scored lower whereas single mothers scored higher than the two parent group.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Discussion

Figure 1 shows the Form R standard score profile for the three family groups. The two parent families were generally composed of a father who had a college education and who was in a technical or managerial occupation and a mother who was employed part time. The family income was about $18,700 per year. The parents were in their mid 40's and had been married for 18 years. There were two children in the family, who were between 13 and 15 years old.

The profile for two parent families indicates the relationships between family members were characterized by

cohesiveness and a low level of conflict. Family members were committed, helpful and supportive of one another. The amount of openly expressed anger, aggression, and conflict among family members was lower than average. Parents perceptions of their families were positive for items such as "There is a feeling of togetherness in our family," and were negative for items such as "Family members often criticize each other."

Fathers and mothers in two parent families also scored above average on the Personal Growth Dimension of moral-religious emphasis. Within the families, ethical and religious issues and values were emphasized. Parents agreed with items such as "Family members attend church, synagogue, or sunday school fairly often." On the other hand, parents' scores for independence and achievement orientation were somewhat below average.

Within the System Maintenance Dimension, parents' scores on organization were above average. In the two parent family clear organization and structure in planning family activities and responsibilities was important. Fathers and mothers agreed with items such as "We are generally very neat and orderly," and "Being on time is fairly important in our family."

The short-term one parent family was usually headed by a mother, although about one-fourth of the parents were

fathers. The parent had been divorced for a year and a half. The father was in his early 40's and had a college education. The mother was about 40 years old and had some college experience. The parent was employed full time and earned about $18,000 per year if the father and about $12,000 if the mother. There were two children in the family between the ages of 11 and 13 years old.

The Family Environment Scale profile indicates the single parent family obtained above-average scores on expressiveness. The extent to which family members were encouraged to act openly and to express their feelings directly was emphasized. Parents agreed with statements like "We say anything we want to around home," and "If we feel like doing something on the spur of the moment we often just pick up and go."

Within the Personal Growth Dimension, short-term single parents obtained above-average scores on independence. Parents answered "true" to items such as "Family members strongly encourage each other to stand up for their rights," and "Family members almost always rely on themselves when a problem comes up." The parents scored slightly lower than average on intellectual-cultural orientation and moral-religious emphasis.

For short-term one parent families, control was important for the System Maintenance Dimension. The extent

to which set rules and procedures were used to run family life were emphasized. Parents agreed with "There are set ways of doing things at home," and "There is a strong emphasis on following rules in our family." Clear organization and structure in planning family activities and responsibilities was not emphasized. The short-term one parent family scored below average on organization. Parents responded false to items such as "Dishes are usually done immediately after eating," "Each person's duties are clearly defined in our family," and "Family members make sure their rooms are neat."

The long-term one parent family was usually headed by a mother (10% were headed by a father). The parent was in their early 40's and had been divorced for 8 years. The parent had some college education, was employed full time, and earned about $12,000 per year if the mother, or about $19,000 per year if the father. There were two children in the family, between the ages of 15 and 17.

The standard score Family Environment profile indicates on the relationship dimension, the long-term one parent family obtained a below-average score on cohesion and an above-average score on expressiveness. Parents agreed with items such as "We rarely volunteer when something has to be done at home," "We tell each

other about our personal problems," and "There are a lot of spontaneous discussions in our family."

The long-term one parent family scored above-average on three of the Personal Growth Dimensions: independence, intellectual-cultural orientation, and active-recreational orientation. The long-term one parent family emphasized the extent to which family members were assertive, self sufficient and made their own decisions. Items such as "We think things out for ourselves in our family," and "Family members strongly encourage each other to stand up for their rights," were agreed with by single fathers and mothers. Interest in political, social, intellectual and cultural activities was important for the family. The parents marked such statements true as: "We often talk about political and social problems," and "Learning about new and different things is very important in our family." The extent of participation in social and recreational activities was also emphasized in the family. Parents agreed with items such as "Friends often come over for dinner or to visit," and "Everyone in our family has a hobby or two." On the System Maintenance Dimension, the long-term family scored slightly lower than average on organization and about average on control.

In summary, the family environment of two parent families emphasizes cohesiveness among family members,

moral and religious belief and practices, and organization of the family as a unit. For short-term one parent families, the environment allows for direct expression of feelings among family members, and independence of members in the family. Decreased focus on intellectual and cultural activities and religious emphasis is also apparent. The family is less organized and more controlling of family members in terms of household rules and duties. The environment of long-term one parent families has less support between family members, although the degree of expressiveness of feelings among members is the highest of the three groups. Independence, being responsible for ones ownself, interest in intellectual and cultural pursuits and participation in recreational activities are encouraged for family members. Although the level of family organization is lower than in two parent homes, it is about average for families in general.

In conclusion, emphasis within the family environment differs for the three groups, although generally the differences are not statistically significant Comparisons between the family group profiles suggest changes which occur during the transition period and a long-term one parent family environment which emphasizes personal growth of family members. Comparisons of the family groups to findings of studies on normal and distressed families show

all three of the family samples are normal families, not distressed.

Generalizations from the study are limited due to the size and nature of the sample. The Long Beach area, while being representative of Southern California, may not be representative of the nation in general. Generalizations from the sample of single parents who are members of Parents Without Partners, Inc., may be limited due to the nature of the social support network and to personal characteristics. The population was well educated and stable. Generalization to lower socioeconomic groups may be limited due to confounding effects of poverty.

The major implication of the study for future research is the importance of identifying and studying functional one parent families as a distinctive family form. Future studies should consider the length of time as a one parent unit; whether the study concerns the immediate effects of the unit itself. Directions for further research might include comparisons between fathers and mothers in the family groups to clarify what differences exist between families that are related to gender. Comparisons of family environments which considered the cause of the situation would be valuable. There may be differences within family groups due to family size. Also, the age and gender of children within family groups needs to be

explored in further studies.

Finally, in line with recent literature, results of the study suggest one parent families should be recognized as a distinct family form and a functioning family unit rather than a "broken" two parent family.

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Table 1

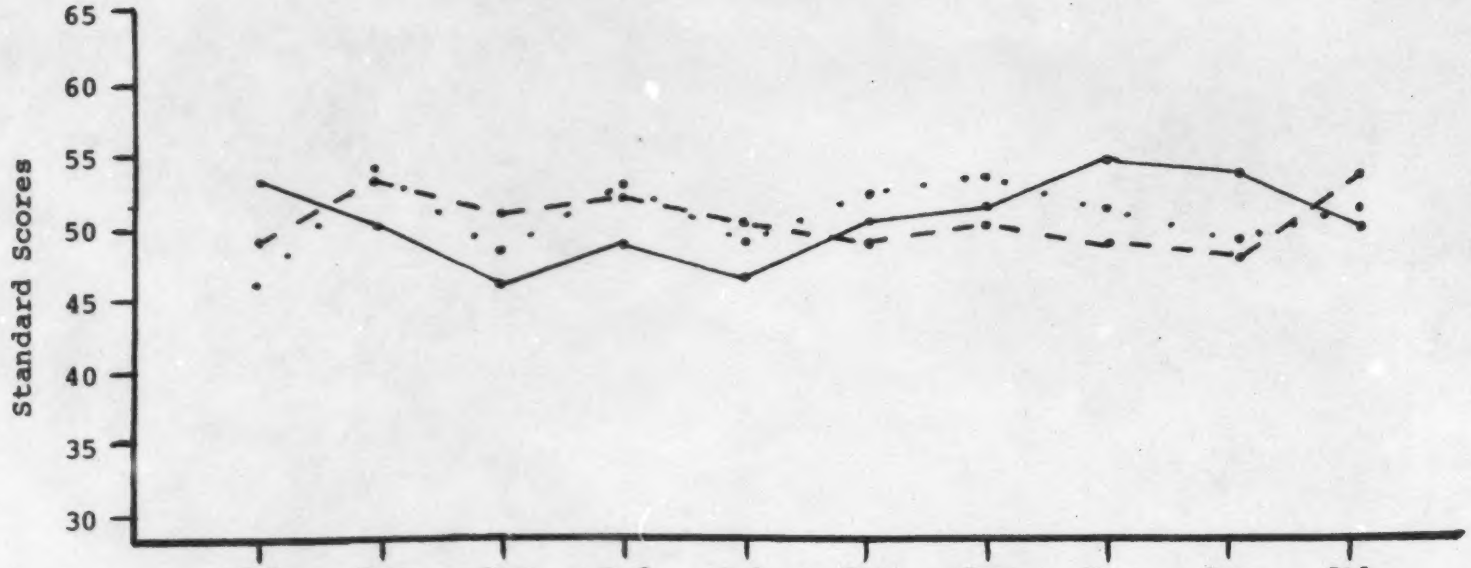
Means, Standard Deviations and ANOVA Comparisons Between Parent Groups

	Two parent groups (N = 16)		One parent groups: short-term (N = 29)		One parent groups: long-term (N = 28)		
	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	F 2/67 d.f.
Cohesion	7.25	2.14	6.31	2.27	6.14	2.52	.278
Expressiveness	5.63	1.96	5.86	1.75	6.00	1.83	.731
Conflict	2.69	2.12	3.45	1.99	3.18	2.42	.356
Independence	6.31	2.12	6.90	1.21	6.93	1.33	2.170
Achievement	5.19	2.01	5.34	1.90	5.29	2.11	.058
Intellectual-Cultural	5.75	2.05	5.62	2.26	5.96	2.44	.214
Recreation	5.50	1.86	5.48	2.34	6.14	2.22	.617
Moral-Religious	5.63	2.39	4.45	2.13	4.89	2.48	3.744*
Organization	6.19	2.04	5.14	2.66	5.25	2.44	1.186
Control	4.38	2.16	4.72	1.91	4.54	1.71	.149

*p < .05

Figure Caption

Figure 1. FES profiles for two parent, short- and long-term one parent families



	Coh.	Exp.	Con.	Ind.	Ach.	Int.	Rec.	Mor.	Org.	Ctl.
Two Parent	53	50	46	49	47	50	51	54	53	50
Short-Term	49	53	51	52	50	49	50	49	48	53
Long-Term	46	54	48	53	49	52	53	51	49	51
Difference	7	4	5	4	3	2	3	5	4	3

Two Parent _____
Short-Term _ _ _ _ _ _
Long-Term . . . . . .